

Africa and the War on Drugs. By Neil Carrier and Gernot Klantschnig. African Arguments. London: Zed, 2012. Pp. 176; bibliography, index. \$26.95 paper.

In November 2009, a burned-out Boeing 727 was found in the desert of northern Mali, near the town of Gao. Investigators believe that drug smugglers had flown some ten tons of cocaine in, unloaded it for transshipment onward to Europe, and then torched the plane. The setting of this now infamous “Air Cocaine” incident was hardly accidental: the Malian government’s writ was never strong in the Sahara, which from time immemorial has served as a route for various goods, licit and illicit, moving from Sub-Saharan Africa to the shores of the Mediterranean and back. In recent years, moreover, militant Islamists, including al-Qaeda’s regional affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), had essentially carved an enclave for themselves in the area, a development which precipitated a French military intervention in January 2013 to prevent the extremists from overrunning the rest of the country. While much of international concern over the survival of the Malian state has focused on its territorial integrity, a number of analysts have underscored that perhaps even more of a threat to the country is the corrosive impact of the drug trade on governmental institutions and civil society.

The narrative is, of course, a familiar one, with the problems associated with the production, trade, and use of drugs contributing to corruption, bad governance, and the eventual emergence of “narco-states.” It is also one which Neil Carrier and Gernot Klantschnig find “decidedly counterproductive” because, so they argue, it sidelines “discussions on human rights in drug policy, the provision of drug treatment facilities and a focus on more pressing drug issues for Africans, including that of the trade in fake medicines” (p. 2). In a clearly unconventional approach which they claim is “the point of view of Africa,” the authors cast a rather wide net—they include under the rubric of “drugs” both legal psychoactive consumables like caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco, and quasi-legal products like khat, as well as illegal substances like cannabis, nonmedical methamphetamine, heroin, and cocaine—justifying the decision with the contention that “being licit does not equate to being free from harm of course, and alcohol and tobacco pose far greater risks to Africans than the likes of heroin through the far greater scale of their consumption” (p. 49).

Challenging “received wisdom” even further, Carrier and Klantschnig contend that the impact of drugs upon development in Africa needs to be appreciated for its complexity, using fascinating case studies of cannabis and khat cultivation and trade to argue that “certain ‘drugs’ can, in fact, be seen to play a positive role in rural livelihoods, and even in their consumption they are not necessarily the great hindrance to development that those wedded to the war on drugs maintain” (p. 77). The authors argue that, with unambiguously harmful substances like heroin and cocaine (for which Africa is a transit hub, rather than a place where they are indigenous or their use socially embedded), the focus should be on the Western consumer countries whose demand drives the creation of the trafficking networks.

Africa and the War on Drugs is an ambitious attempt to present an alternative perspective on the question of drug use and trafficking across the continent. The authors’ are not entirely successful in making their case—*inter alia*, they acknowledge that “the

extent and reliability of source material is patchy” (p. 17), and devote far more space to the description of the khat trade in East Africa (the subject of Carrier’s doctoral dissertation in social anthropology) than to the political economy of Guinea-Bissau, which even the United Nations has characterized as a “narco-state,” much less to any analysis of the growing evidence of operational linkages between AQIM terrorists and criminal networks engaged in drug trafficking in the Sahel. Their argument, nonetheless, is one that deserves to be engaged.

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